



The Joy of the Lord

Proclaiming

LAW & *Gospel*

in a Secular Age

by Ken Maher

Watching the news lately can be a dizzying experience. It seems like every day there is a new group of poor souls who are the victims of hatred, prejudice, and unfair treatment. With so many victim groups vying for our attention and redress it can be hard to keep up. People are being denied cakes and photos and weddings. Or worse, the right to use the bathroom. Women are being denied the most basic of health care. Others are being shown that their lives don't matter, or their deaths are not theirs to dictate. Foreigners are treated with fear and revulsion, being unfairly judged for the acts of just a few. And talking to our neighbours and co-workers about these very real and

very important issues can be a frustration and a fear for us Christians—especially when we come to realize that there are those who want to blame it all on us.

The charge goes like this: It is our stand for traditional marriage that belittles homosexuals. It is our belief that God created us male and female that leaves no protection for transsexuals. It is our Christian insistence that every life has worth, even life in the womb, that keeps women oppressed and firmly under the patriarchal glass ceiling. It is our plea that every life matters to God that degrades the life of those who suffer more (or differently) than us. It is our trust in God to dictate the number of our days that denies suicidal

people the mercy and dignity that comes with being the masters of our own death. It is our Christian worldview, claiming to have the truth, that fosters suspicion and distrust of other religious adherents. Everyone, it seems, is a victim but us Christians.

And while we may be taken aback at just how fast things seem to be changing, we shouldn't be surprised. The fact is, it has never really been any different—nor would we expect it to be. A world not anchored by God is a world adrift in spiritual relativism and ever swelling moral outrage. It is the only kind of world we humans know how to build by ourselves. Paul described it perfectly in Galatians 5:19-21—“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

While the works and their results in our world may be all too evident to you or me, they are not so obvious to those who find their identity in being victimized. So the question becomes, what should the public witness of Christians be in a secular society like the one we currently inhabit? Sometimes Christian witness to public events and social issues is primarily reactionary—calling out the many sinful acts. And while such prophetic witness against moral decline is necessary, how do we make sure our profession of the Gospel takes centre stage?

The answer, I believe, is in setting a different scene. Singing a different tune. Not playing the same game. Instead of righting this very broken world on its own broken terms we should be turning the world upside down once again. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has always been counter cultural. It speaks a different language. It calls for a different kind of life. It views the world in a wholly different light. And so should we.

Consider again Paul's admonition from Galatians: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Here is our counter culture. Here is the stuff that can turn this world of ours upside down. Here is a powerful blueprint for effective evangelism.

Each one of these precious gifts of the Spirit is worth its own evangelism discussion, but for now let us start with Joy. Why joy? Because the one thing that binds together the countless victim groups and their wildly differing agendas is a lack of joy. To put it simply, there is no joy in the modern culture of victimhood. There can't be. There is lots of protesting, and even some celebration when your cause is recognized and your claim legitimized. But there can be no real joy. For new oppressors must be rooted out. New battles must be fought. New victims identified and rallied around. And through it all is the underlying question no one is willing to face: “With each new victory, why are things only getting worse?” We might as well ask why a bad

tree bears only rotten fruit. In a culture where everyone but Christians are victims no one can or will find joy—except, perhaps, those Christians themselves.

Consider the Christian's joy of hard work, of family, and home. The joy of contentment and thankfulness. The joy of serving others and making sacrifices for those who need the help. Each can be a powerful witness to a deeper truth. Consider the disciples leaving the courts of the Sanhedrin bloodied and bruised but full of joy that they should be considered worthy to suffer for Christ. Remember Paul and Silas, wrongfully beaten and imprisoned for their compassion, singing and praying in joy through the night. Think of all the dear Christians leaving the gravesides of their loved ones, saddened but still full of joy at the hope of the resurrection to come. Christians have always found joy, even when the whole world is against us.

Why? Because while we might suffer hatred, prejudice and unfair treatment, we are not victims. In all our struggles, in all our hardships, for all our sins and faults and shortcomings we are still more than conquerors in Christ Jesus. The same Jesus Christ who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, is seated today at the right hand of the throne of God. We are not victims, because Christ was. This is the good news that brings us great joy in an otherwise joyless world—a joy that when lived and proclaimed will turn this victimized world upside down.

We have the joy of a God who reaches out to every last one of the excluded and the marginalized, by including Himself in our human frailty through the life of His only begotten Son born in our human flesh. We have the joy of His promise of perfect healing, not just the brokenness of our bodies, but more importantly, our hearts and souls as well. We have the joy of knowing that our life matters to God so much that He was willing to lay down His own life for us. And we have the joy of knowing that because Christ rose from the dead, death will not hold us either; we will rise with Him victorious forever. This does not mean we will not suffer, face trials, or be grieved. But it does mean that through the sustaining Word and Sacraments of Christ we have the joyous certainty that such things cannot ultimately make us victims. We have already conquered them in Christ.

Our anchor to God in this fast changing and frustrating world is the joy of living in His enduring love through Jesus. In a world where the harder people work, the more victims there seem to be, where the expectations of so many are doomed to perish, we can still live a life of joy. Joy even in the midst of so much trouble. Joy that is firmly rooted in the promises of Christ the willing victim who makes each of us true victors. As the Psalmist declares so may we live and act and speak: “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” (Psalm 32:10).

Rev. Ken Maher is Pastor of Christ our Hope Lutheran Church in Collingwood, Ontario.